

DR. JOHN McLOUGHLIN AND THE BOTANY OF THE
PACIFIC NORTHWEST

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Among the unrecognized contributors to the development of the botany of the Pacific Northwest is Dr. John McLoughlin, Chief Factor for the Hudson's Bay Company from 1824 to 1846 with headquarters at Fort Vancouver, situated on the northern bank of the Columbia River, 120 miles inland from the Pacific Ocean. From Fort Vancouver, McLoughlin ruled with dictatorial authority an empire that extended from California to Alaska and from the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean and which was inhabited only by savage Indians and white fur traders. Also at Fort Vancouver he was awarded the first medal for botany to be presented in the Pacific Northwest.

During these years the region was a virgin wilderness with the forts of the fur traders providing the only haven to which a weary traveller might turn for some degree of civilized comfort. The botany of the area was unexplored and challenged scientists of both America and Europe. Without the cooperation of the officials of the Fur Company the collecting of the new and interesting plants of the Northwest would have been delayed for many years. Of particular interest to the scientific history of the Pacific Northwest is the fact that all of the early botanical explorers were welcomed by Dr. McLoughlin so that during his years as Chief Factor, Fort Vancouver became in effect the scientific headquarters of what was then known as the Oregon Country.

In April, 1825, the first two scientists to explore extensively in the Pacific Northwest arrived from England just as McLoughlin was moving his headquarters from Fort George, Astoria, to Vancouver. These were Dr. John Scouler, naturalist, and ship surgeon on the Hudson's Bay Company's *William and Anne*, and David Douglas, botanist sent by the Horticultural Society of London.

Dr. Scouler remained in the Northwest but a few months collecting zoological and botanical specimens, and on his return to England he was the first scientist to describe in British scientific journals the practice of the Chinook Indians of flattening the skull of infants of the Indian aristocracy. Scouler met McLoughlin at Fort George and wrote of him in his diary:

From him I experienced the utmost politeness and to his kindness was indebted for some curious specimens of the rocks of the Rocky Mountains.

David Douglas, one of the most prolific botanical collectors of the Pacific Northwest, explored much of the Oregon Country during the years 1825-1827 and 1832-1833. His explorations were interrupted by a return journey to England.

On first meeting McLoughlin he noted in his diary:



FIG. 1. Dr. John McLoughlin. Portrait made about 1845. Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society.

... I embarked in a small boat with Mr. John McLoughlin, the Chief Factor, who received me with demonstrations of the most kindly feelings, and showed me every civility which it was in his power to bestow.

Douglas showed McLoughlin his written instructions from the Horticultural Society and discussed his plans verbally. As a result of the conversation, Douglas wrote:

In the most frank and handsome manner he assured me that everything in his power would be done to promote the views of the society.

Fort Vancouver became the headquarters for Douglas as he radiated out in all directions to collect seeds, pressed specimens and living plants of an unknown and exciting flora. The Fort was used to dry and prepare his specimens, and pack them for shipment to England on board the ships of the Hudson's Bay Company. Dr. McLoughlin made all facilities of the Fort available to him including boats and horses for transportation.



FIG. 2. Fort Vancouver, 1845. Courtesy of the Oregon Historical Society.

For cooperating in promoting the study of botany in the Pacific Northwest, Dr. McLoughlin was awarded a silver medal by the Horticultural Society of London on May 11, 1826. This medal was the first scientific award made in the Oregon Country and is today on exhibit in the McLoughlin house, a public shrine, in Oregon City, Oregon. The *Transactions of the Horticultural Society* refer to the awarding of the medal as follows:

To John McLoughlan [sic], the Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company, at the mouth of the River Columbia, for his assistance rendered Mr. David Douglas, whilst making his collections in the countries belonging to the Hudson's Bay Company in the Western part of North America.

After taking his final leave from the Oregon Country Douglas, whose name is today popularly associated with the Northwest's most important lumbering tree, the so-called Douglas fir, summarized the status of science in this wild country:

Science has few friends among those who visit the coast of North-West America, solely with a view to gain. Still with such a person as Mr. McLoughlin on the Columbia, they may do a great deal of service to Natural History.

The first two scientists to travel across the American continent reached Fort Vancouver in September, 1834. They were Thomas Nuttall, botanist and naturalist, who resigned his position at Harvard University in order to accompany Nathaniel Wyeth on his second overland expedition, and J. Kirk Townsend, a young Philadelphia ornithologist. Although Nuttall and Townsend had accompanied Wyeth who was attempting the establishment of a rival fur company under American auspices, they were well received by Dr. McLoughlin at Fort Vancouver.

Townsend recorded the events of the expedition in a delightful narrative in which he frequently referred to the activities of Dr. McLoughlin. Although he did not record any particular act of hospitality at the Fort, his account indicates that he and Nuttall were frequent and welcomed visitors. Actually for several months Townsend was placed in charge of the hospital of Fort Vancouver and he acted as physician in the absence of a regular company medical doctor. The only account of Nuttall's activities on this expedition was recorded by Townsend in his narrative. Although Nuttall kept a diary on other occasions, no diary of his trip to the Oregon Country is known at the present time. He described his plant collection of the Northwest in the *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* in 1840. Nuttall's name is particularly perpetuated in the region by the beautiful flowering dogwood (*Cornus nuttallii*) named by the famous ornithologist James Audubon.

The greatest array of scientists to visit McLoughlin at Fort Vancouver was the members of the United States Exploring Expedition under the command of Lieutenant Charles Wilkes. The expeditionary forces had been split up in making surveys in various areas of the Pacific Ocean so that they arrived at different times during the summer months of 1841. The narrative of the expedition by Commander Wilkes contains numerous references to and descriptions of Dr. McLoughlin and Fort Vancouver. The hospitality shown Wilkes was recorded as follows:

He is a tall fine-looking person of a very robust frame, with a frank manly open countenance, and a florid complexion; his hair is perfectly white. He gave us that kind reception we had been led to expect from his well-known hospitality He at once ordered dinner for us, and we soon felt ourselves at home, having comfortable rooms assigned us, and being treated as part of the establishment.

A few days later McLoughlin provided Wilkes with a large river barge, fully provisioned, so that he could adequately explore the Willamette River.

William D. Brackenridge, horticulturist of the expedition, likewise was impressed with McLoughlin, his gardens, and his orchards. Of this he wrote:

I can say but little, having spent only a few hours with the principal, Dr. McLoughlin, who in the most friendly manner showed me around his gardens.

The botanical collection of the Wilkes expedition was described by Dr. Asa Gray. One large volume of 777 pages and atlas was published in 1854 and another volume remains unpublished. The ferns and fern allies were described by Brackenridge in a 357-page volume with atlas, also in 1854.

An overland exploring expedition under Captain John C. Fremont was organized to coordinate the inland exploration with the activities of the Wilkes expedition. On November 8, 1843, Captain Fremont arrived at Fort Vancouver and in his report of the expedition recounted the meeting with Dr. McLoughlin:

I immediately waited upon Dr. McLoughlin, the executive officer of the Hudson Bay Company in the territory west of the Rocky Mountains, who received me with

the courtesy and hospitality for which he has been eminently distinguished, and which makes a forcible and delightful impression on a traveller from the long wilderness from which we had issued. . . . but every hospitable attention was extended to me, and I accepted an invitation to take a room in the fort, "and to make myself at home while I staid."

The plants collected by Fremont were described by Dr. John Torrey in 1854 in a volume of the *Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge* and also in Fremont's report.

This account could easily be lengthened by quoting records of other acts of hospitality administered by the well-known Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company. Also, it could be pointed out that McLoughlin's employees, particularly the medical doctors of the Fort, made important discoveries in botany and natural history. Their books constituted the first science library in the Pacific Northwest. However, another important contribution of McLoughlin to science must not be overlooked; his control over the native Indians which made the wild forests relatively safe for the pioneer scientific explorers.

Dr. McLoughlin, as supreme ruler of the Pacific Northwest, was a strict disciplinarian who combatted Indian crimes with stern justice. H. H. Bancroft in his *History of the Northwest Coast* described McLoughlin's unusual influence over the savage mind. Before McLoughlin's time it was not safe to travel far except in armed bands. After McLoughlin's time as Chief Factor, the history of the Pacific Northwest is marked by brutal massacres and bloody Indian wars which took the lives of many white settlers. However, Bancroft pointed out that McLoughlin:

. . . achieved by his wise and humane policy a bloodless revolution, savage foes metamorphosed into steadfast friends, a wilderness teeming with treachery into a garden of safe repose.

While much has been written of McLoughlin and thousands of people each year visit his historic home, his contributions to the sciences, particularly the botany, of the Pacific Northwest have been entirely ignored by historical writers. September 3, 1957, marked the centennial of the death of the once mighty ruler of the Oregon Country and it is proper that the scientific world take slight note of a great friend.

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REVIEWS

Native Plants for California Gardens. By LEE W. LENZ. ix + 166 pp., frontispiece (color photograph), 100 halftone illustrations. 1956. Published by Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden. For sale at Abbey Garden Press, Pasadena, California. \$3.85.

According to the foreword: "This book is the outgrowth of a series of papers devoted to the botany and horticulture of California plants, published as the Leaflets of Popular Information by the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden. An attempt has been made to select from the native flora those species which can be recommended as of value to gardeners, described them in simple language and giving their cultural